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Group seeks funds to fight freeway

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A group battling the proposed South Mountain Freeway through Ahwatukee Foothills will ratchet up its fight and ask for donations to wage war against the project.

The first public meeting of the grass-roots Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children is 2 p.m. Saturday. Organizers said they plan to use donations to their non-profit 501(c)(3) group to hire experts to analyze a draft environmental impact statement being prepared by the Arizona Department of Transportation.

Those experts will include traffic engineers and air quality experts, said Howard Shanker, a Tempe-based environmental lawyer who has been hired by the group, also known as PARC.

In addition to the experts, the group will pay Shanker for his time even if it doesn't sue to stop the project.

"We're going to submit comments on the draft environmental impact statement, filing whatever administrative appeals are necessary and then go forward," he said.

Shanker, who lives in Ahwatukee Foothills, shares PARC's opposition.

"The vast majority of people, my impression is they're opposed," he said.

Residents have varying opinions. Some say they want ADOT to build the freeway. Others are opposed, saying they either didn't know about it, figured it had been delayed so long that it never would be built or don't like it for the environmental and traffic problems it could bring.

The freeway was first proposed in 1988 but was an unfunded project in the 1990s. It now is envisioned as a \$1.7 billion, 22-mile project that would complete the southwestern portion of Loop 202 designed to ring the Valley. ADOT picked Pecos Road as the most likely route through Ahwatukee Foothills and last year chose 55th Avenue as the preferred route to connect with Interstate 10 in the West Valley.

A final decision on whether to build the freeway and where isn't expected until next year. First, ADOT needs to complete a federally mandated environmental impact statement. A public draft statement is expected this summer, followed by a final version this fall. The period between is the best window for PARC to lodge complaints about the report.

After that, the Federal Highway Administration will weigh in. ADOT will make the final decision about whether to build the freeway. The Maricopa Association of Governments will decide whether to fund it.

Saturday's meeting is a chance for the public to get involved in the fight, Shanker said.

"The organization has two goals for the meeting. One is to let everyone know they're out there. The other is to let people know how to help," he said.

Lawsuits rarely stop freeways, although some have been delayed, re-routed or redesigned to suit critics' environmental concerns. One of them was a freeway planned in Nevada that garnered concessions from the Sierra Club, Shanker said.

Jim Jochim, PARC's treasurer, who with Melanie Pai and Greta Rogers founded the group, said they hope to have similar success but first need to raise money.

Asked what the group would do with funds left after the fight, Jochim said: "Well, we're not going to Disneyland."

He added that PARC most likely would donate any extra money to another non-profit group.

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